

News from the

**U.S. Senate Committee on
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**

Michael B. Enzi (Wyoming), Chairman



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***ENZI, HELP MEMBERS WORKING ON BILL TO MOVE MINE
SAFETY INTO 21ST CENTURY FOLLOWING W-Va TRAGEDIES***

Washington, D.C. - U.S. Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY), Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP Committee), today said the Committee is working to develop legislation that will “move mine safety into the 21st Century,” and reduce safety risks for miners across the country.

However, he cautioned that the challenge to improve mine safety through new technology will be to avoid a “one size fits all” approach to safety. “There are challenges to implementing new and emerging mine safety technologies that we can address by legislative action, but some that we cannot. We can and will work to better coordinate governmental research efforts that may have application in the mining environment,” Enzi said.

During today’s hearing, “The State of Mine Safety and Health,” Enzi called for enhancing dedicated mine safety research efforts through a combination of increased funding and structural re-organization of the agency tasked with mine safety research. He pledged to work with HELP Committee members as well as other interested Senators and stakeholders to produce legislation that will move mine safety into the 21st Century.

Since the Alma and Sago mine tragedies in West Virginia, many have voiced hope that development of wireless two-way phone communications, two-way text messaging, and portable oxygen devices containing enough oxygen to sustain miners and rescue teams for hours after an accident may reduce deaths and improve safety overall. However, Enzi cautioned that: “We must keep in mind that mining environments vary considerably from mine to mine. While some technology will work in some mine settings, it may not work in others.”

Among the initiatives being considered as the HELP Committee develops legislation are new laws and regulations designed to speed the approval and certification process for new technology and to harnessing private sector resources to promote technology development.

“The task of developing new mine safety technology clearly will require new and creative ways to stimulate private sector research and development,” Enzi said. “Miners deserve the best safety equipment and technology that we can provide, and we should take all steps necessary to enhance its development and speed its implementation.”

Despite the recent tragedies, Enzi said that both injury and fatality rates in mining have shown a steady downward trend, adding that the total number of mine fatalities and injury rates were the lowest on record in 2005.

“Overall, we have made strides improving and promoting mine safety,” he said. “However, we can and must do better. Every miner deserves to return home safely at the end of the day. Even one avoidable accident is one too many, and we must act to reduce the safety risk for miners everywhere.”

He credited the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) for maintaining actual on-site time agency’s personnel spend inspecting mines, despite an overall decrease in staff levels. Over the same period of time the number of mines in operation and the number of miners employed has undergone a downward trend parallel to the reduction in MSHA staffing.

Coal is vital to the economy of Enzi’s home state of Wyoming, which is the largest producer of coal in the nation. Wyoming’s surface coal mining industry ships an average of one million tons of coal a day. On January 20, Enzi and the HELP Committee’s Ranking Member Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), Senator Johnny Isakson (R-GA), and Senator Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) traveled to West Virginia to meet with the families of Sago Mine workers as well as officials of the International Coal Group (ICG) and MSHA.

“The best way we can honor the memory of those who have been lost is by protecting the safety of those that remain. We do this best by developing laws and regulations that enhance practical and innovative solutions, rather than simply enacting rigid rules; by developing and sharing new technology and encouraging rather than

discouraging its use; and by seeking practical approaches to mine safety that yield real-world results,” Enzi concluded.

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